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Report of the Secretary-General on submission of documentation consistent with the six-week rule**

Summary

The present report describes the measures taken by the Secretariat to strengthen responsibility and accountability in the submission of documentation, inter alia, programming and monitoring the submission process, regular meetings of focal points for documentation and planning meetings with substantive departments and bureaux of intergovernmental organs. The report also proposes measures that could lead to the timely issuance of documentation.

* A/56/150.

** Consultations within the Secretariat and follow-up action required time and delayed the preparation of the present report.

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I. Introduction and overview

1. The General Assembly, in section III of its resolution 55/222 of 23 December 2000, requested the Secretary-General to ensure that documentation is available in accordance with the six-week rule for the distribution of documents simultaneously in the six official languages of the General Assembly; it also requested the Secretary-General to strengthen accountability and responsibility measures, where applicable, as requested in section C, paragraph 11, of its resolution 54/248 of 23 December 1999, to correct the alarming situation concerning the submission of documentation consistent with the six-week rule and requested him to submit a report thereon to the Assembly at its fifty-sixth session.

2. In the same resolution, the General Assembly also invited intergovernmental bodies, during their organizational sessions or other appropriate periods before the commencement of their substantive work, to review with author departments the question of the availability of documentation for the proper functioning of those bodies and to report thereon to the General Assembly at its fifty-sixth session through the Committee on Conferences. A compilation of replies received from some of the bodies will be presented in a separate report to the General Assembly.

II. Strengthening accountability and responsibility in the preparation of documentation

A. Programming and monitoring of documentation

3. As part of its core responsibilities, the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services, through its Documentation Programming and Monitoring Unit, has assumed the functions of coordinating the submission of documentation for the General Assembly, its General Committee, its Main Committees and its various subsidiary organs, as well as for the Economic and Social Council and most of its subsidiary bodies. A computerized database application has successfully replaced, at no additional cost, the traditional paper-based management system. This has greatly simplified and enhanced the efficiency of retrieving and analysing documentation-related information and, by providing more readily available information, has increased the awareness and accountability on the part of submitting departments. The database can also query and generate customized documentation status reports for the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council, thus making the following initiatives possible:

(a) Documentation requests by the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council, mainly contained in the resolutions and decisions adopted towards the end of each session, are now compiled by the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services. This information is circulated to the respective author departments/offices more quickly, enabling them to get an early start in the drafting process;

(b) Status reports, sorted by author department, provide assistance in the monitoring of the documentation and delivery schedule. The reports serve as a reminder of documents due and their submission deadlines;

(c) For each session, customized information on compliance with documentation submission deadlines can be generated, sorted by organ or author department. This information assists servicing secretariats and author departments in identifying problems and making improvements in their future work.

B. Focal points for documentation

4. In order to strengthen documentation accountability and responsibility, a liaison network was formally established, consisting of focal points from all author departments, funds and programmes, the specialized agencies and duty stations away from Headquarters. This network helps to identify the chain of responsibility in the preparation of documentation and improve coordination of document submissions from author departments. Periodic meetings are held with all the focal points and representatives of the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services to plan and review the timing and other requirements of document submissions and to inform and discuss the rules and regulations pertaining to the preparation of documentation.

C. Planning meeting

5. In the past, ad hoc consultations have taken place between the servicing secretariats and bureaux of the intergovernmental bodies on the one hand, and the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services on the other. During the past year, in accordance with paragraph 1 of section III of General Assembly resolution 55/222, the Department has initiated planning meetings with the servicing secretariats and substantive departments, bearing in mind all the relevant rules and regulations, including the 10-week rule for document submission.

D. Documentation forecast

6. While the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services continues to rely on documentation forecasts to plan its allocation of resources, difficulties persist in obtaining accurate forecasts of the volume and timing of documentation from author departments. Further efforts are required on the part of the submitting departments to provide more precise documentation forecasts as an effective planning tool for conference services.

E. Footnotes

7. The General Assembly, in its resolution 55/222, reiterated its decision that if a report is submitted late to conference services, the reasons therefor should be included in a footnote to the document. That request was first introduced for documentation of the fifty-fifth session of the General Assembly. Out of a total of 462 pre-session documents, 365 (79 per cent) were submitted after the 4 July deadline (the date by which documents should have been submitted in compliance with the 10-week rule). Roughly half of these late submissions carried footnotes provided by the author department.

8. Among reasons given for late submission were the need to include more up-to-date information or developments, the need for lengthy consultations before preparation of reports, late receipt of inputs from Member States and/or other departments/agencies and the fact that events reported on were scheduled too close to the session of the General Assembly.

III. Suggested actions

A. Processing late submissions

9. Late submission continues to be the main cause for the low rate of compliance with the six-week rule on the issuance of documentation. When a document is submitted late, in consultation with the substantive secretariat and the bureau of the body concerned, and in order to minimize the negative impact of late submissions by one intergovernmental organ on the timely issuance of documents for other organs, the late submission could be processed by rescheduling the processing of other documents submitted for consideration by the same body after a review of the overall documentation of the intergovernmental organ concerned.

B. Periodicity of reporting cycles

10. Reporting cycles of intergovernmental bodies that end close to the opening of the session at which their reports are considered make timely submission impossible and result in late issuance. Intergovernmental organs could review their reporting cycles with a view to either changing the reporting period in order to allow for adequate time for the drafting of their report or introducing periodicity in the form of quarterly or biannual instead of annual reports. Accordingly, instead of voluminous reports submitted late for processing, the reports would be submitted and issued in instalments, allowing ample time for conference services to process the documents and provide timely information to Member States.

C. Submission of addenda to update information

11. In a number of cases, author departments delay submission in order to include the most up-to-date information in their reports. Intergovernmental organs may wish to authorize substantive departments to prepare reports with an earlier cut-off date, with the possibility of including additional information, if necessary, in addenda to the parent document. This suggested action could work similarly to the one described in paragraph 10 above.

D. Adjusting the programme of work

12. While reviewing the status of documentation, and in cases of recurrent late submissions, servicing secretariats and bureaux of intergovernmental bodies may wish to adjust their programme of work by delaying or postponing consideration of related items or documents. This practice is actually followed by several bodies and requires adjusting programmes of work to the realities of documentation.

IV. Conclusions

13. **To remedy the situation of late issuance of documentation, a concerted effort on the part of the Member States and the Secretariat is necessary. While steps are being taken in the Secretariat to coordinate the preparation of reports at an earlier stage and to improve the monitoring of their submission for processing, the recommendations of the Committee on Conferences in its report to the fifty-fifth session of the General Assembly,[1] some of which have been repeated above, can also play a role at the processing stage of documentation. As previously noted, intergovernmental organs and Member States, by limiting their requests for documentation, can also contribute to ameliorating the situation. Rationalizing of programmes of work along the lines proposed in numerous resolutions can be of further help in this regard.**

Notes

[1] *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-fifth session, Supplement No. 32* (A/55/32), paras. 109 and 110.